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Lacrosse has a diversity problem in Montgomery County. This after-school program is looking to change that.



White Oak middle-schoolers say they were surprised by how much fun that had playing lacrosse during an after-school program organized by the Montgomery County Recreation Department. (Aaron Credeur/TWP)

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By [Aaron Credeur](#)

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The kids at White Oak Middle School play lacrosse on a tennis court instead of a field.

In fact, they don't really play lacrosse per se — instead, one of the students calls out rules for a makeshift adaptation of ultimate Frisbee as they use lacrosse sticks to practice chucking the ball at each other for roughly 30 minutes after school.

Another visible difference about this game, compared with most lacrosse matches, is that the athletes are mostly Black or Latino.

MoCo Lacrosse was designed by Jeff Wagner to teach the fundamentals of the sport to students in Montgomery County who have no familiarity with it. The program rarely follows the sport's official rules, but Wagner says learning even the basics of catching and throwing can go a long way toward developing skills that will transfer to a competitive high school team.

“They’ve never seen it before,” said Wagner, who started teaching lacrosse to Black and Latino youth in the county to balance opportunities in what he calls a “preppy, rich-kid sport.”

A three-time all-Ivy League lacrosse player for Brown University, Wagner began coaching more than 20 years ago when he started Rosemary Hills Lacrosse to teach the sport at a pair of recreation centers in Silver Spring. Wagner hired local high school students to work as counselors at the all-day summer camps.

But the pandemic limited his ability to teach in local community centers, and when the Montgomery County Department of Recreation received a federal grant to introduce new athletic options for after-school programs, Wagner became a community partner.

“Play Montgomery added a lot of financial resources to help us make sure that we were connecting with youth who might not otherwise have had an opportunity to try a sport that they didn’t know [or] didn’t have the financial resources to participate in,” said Robin Riley, director of the Montgomery County Department of Recreation. “We’ve been very intentional about, you know, making sure that we were supporting communities in terms of social and racial equity.”

Wagner, whose program ended last week for the winter, said he plans to expand to elementary and middle schools throughout the county.

“I didn’t expect it to be this fun,” eighth-grader Anthony Harris said one afternoon this month.



Jeff Wagner's after-school lacrosse program aims to expand access to the sport for communities throughout Montgomery County. (Aaron Credeur/TWP)

For many of the kids participating in the program, lacrosse was a foreign concept when Wagner began offering it as an after-school activity. Even 20 years after lacrosse was introduced in public high schools in Montgomery County, significant barriers remain for many students looking to start playing, including low popularity and high equipment costs.

Despite lacrosse thriving among affluent private school communities, many local public schools, such as Springbrook High in Silver Spring, struggle to field complete varsity and junior varsity teams each season.

“Last year was obviously a special case, but we only had 17 girls total on our roster,” Springbrook girls’ coach Jenelle Dozier said. “But I didn’t have one practice where I had all 17 girls at practice, which is really difficult for practicing purposes.”

Dozier helps work with the middle-schoolers at White Oak along with Wagner and Springbrook boys’ assistant coach Ben Smith. They pay students from nearby high schools to lend a hand.

Dozier and Smith make no secret that they’re hoping some of the middle school students will join Springbrook’s lacrosse team once they enter high school. For somewhat selfish reasons, they’re betting the influx of players will give their teams a competitive boost.

But there’s a more inclusive reason, too.

“Having the team makeup represent the school community more closely helps to promote the sport in the future,” Smith said.

It’s no coincidence these changes are happening during the pandemic. Riley says students have been eager to return to some form of social activity, and learning a new sport together in a casual environment fits that need.

“For almost a year, [students] had nothing but screen time,” Riley said. “To see them learning how to be a teammate and connect with people when you didn’t do that for a year ... we’re hearing from their family members that they’re, you know, they’re doing better academically and they’re more engaged in school.”

MoCo Lacrosse was paused as the fall semester ended in Montgomery County, but Wagner and Riley are working together to establish an indoor winter program on middle school basketball courts.

There is still work to be done to make sports such as lacrosse, golf and tennis more inclusive for coaches and players, but programs such as Wagner’s are a step toward greater athletic diversity.

As the students at White Oak practiced catching the ball — or, more often, ran to scoop a dropped one — a seventh-grader called out an idea for a new game: monkey in the middle but using lacrosse sticks to lob the ball to a partner.

Even if it isn’t traditional lacrosse, Wagner says whatever gets the kids engaged and excited about a new sport can help lay the groundwork for their athletic careers — and also instill discipline, friendships and healthy lifestyles.